

Dragonshards

The Gnomes of Zilargo, Part 1

By Keith Baker



Dorilan Del Caroldan sipped his tal and studied the map on the table. "The first temple to the Mockery -- just imagine what secrets it must hold! But this is one ruin you'll never raid, Solas."

The half-orc roared with laughter. "I'm sure it will be dangerous, Dorilan, but we've faced far worse. I've spent more time in Xen'drik than I have in the Marches. Don't worry, my little friend -- we'll keep you safe on the journey."

"It's not my safety that worries me, or the dangers of Xen'drik. Bursting into the Preceptor's estate, spilling blood in the light of day, beating that merchant for information -- that's not how things are done here."

Solas smiled and took a deep draught of his koreshk ale. Gnomes and their sense of propriety. The funny little man wouldn't last a day in Sharn. "Why not? I haven't seen a guardsman since I arrived. I've never seen a softer city." He looked at the door. "What's keeping Kyrna and Jaral? It's been nearly an hour."

"They're both dead," Dorilan said. But he wasn't Dorilan any more.

Solas' hand flew to the hilt of his sword, but his muscles turned to ice before he could draw. He strained with all his might, but he could not move.

The gnome smiled, revealing the ivory wand she'd kept hidden beneath the table. She was younger than Dorilan, and dressed in darkweave and leather. "We believe the best guards are those that remain unseen." Silvered steel glittered as a dagger appeared in her hand.

In a world where halflings ride dinosaurs and elf raiders seek glory in battle, few people see the gnomes as a threat. The little people are scholars and shipwrights, bards and bookbinders. Zilargo is filled with color and cheer, and the common image of the Zil gnome is that of a jolly craftsman always ready to lend a hand or an ear to those in need.

But those who actually spend time among the gnomes know better. Zilargo is far deeper and darker than it appears, and the cheerful demeanor of the gnome is a carefully cultivated mask. A gnome may be no match for a half-orc barbarian in a fair fight -- but the gnomes of Zilargo seldom fight fair.

Jungle Rats

The first mention of the gnomes can be found in the records of the Empire of Dhakaan. The Ghuurash Codex provides details about the first Dhakaan campaign against the "jungle rats" that infested the coast between the Howling Peaks and the Seawall Mountains. The gnomes of ten thousand years ago were feral and primitive -- a far cry from the civilization seen today. The hobgoblin sages believed that the gnomes were rodents that had been twisted by a conduit to Thelanis, or stunted, thin-blooded wererats that had lost the ability to shift forms.

Proponents of this theory cited the small size of the gnomes, the strong instinctive bond within a family, the gnomish preference for burrows, and the racial ability to communicate with burrowing mammals.

The savage gnomes were no match for the disciplined armies of Dhakaan, and the empire spread across the region. The gnomes were enslaved or forced deeper into the wilds. But conquest was far easier than occupation. While primitive, the gnomes were masters of their environment and had a particular gift with poisons; they could not fight Dhakaani armies, but they could poison wells and ambush supply trains. While they never presented a true threat to the empire, the gnomes remained a thorn in the side of the goblin invaders for many hundreds of years.

The stalemate may have continued to this day, but destiny came in the form of the daelkyr. The extraplanar incursion crippled the empire, and the gnomes pounced on the weakened foe. In addition to physical sabotage and assassination, the gnomes began to employ the psychological techniques that would come to define their future nation. While the gnomes had yet to master the arts of wizardry, magic has always run through the blood of the gnomes. While many gnomes could summon a voice from the shadows, a few became full-fledged sorcerers, specializing in illusion. Combining magic with mundane arts of disguise and forgery, the gnomes took advantage of the shattered lines of communication in the empire to sow dissent among the commanders in the region, turning goblin against goblin and helping to ignite the civil wars that tore Dhakaan asunder.

The City-States Emerge

As the goblins pulled back, the gnomes seized cities depopulated by the daelkyr, voraciously devouring the knowledge left behind and building new civilizations in the ruins of what had come before. Slowly families joined together to form the city-states of Trolanport, Korranberg, and Zolanberg. They fought goblins in the lowlands and kobolds in the mountains, and at times they fought each other; but the gnomes always preferred to fight with guile and deception, winning conflicts with wits instead of steel. The gnomes always numbered few and felt no need to conquer the land -- they contentedly held off enemies and maintained the territory they had claimed.

But while the gnomes had no interest in expansion and colonization, they were always driven by a thirst for knowledge. At its deepest level, this is a survival instinct: The gnome knows that information is a weapon. The more he knows about an enemy, the more power he has -- and everyone is a potential enemy. Gnomes began to explore the continent, trade with the emerging cultures of Khorvaire, and learn all there was to know about land and water.

The Birth of Zilargo

The most critical moment in the history of the nation was the foundation of the Library of Korranberg. As the dragonmarks began to appear in Khorvaire, the loremaster Dorius Alyre Korran swore that he would build a fortress of knowledge -- an institute that would unlock every mystery of Eberron. This idea fired the imagination of gnomes across the region, and slowly this project became a national obsession. All three city-states donated resources to the Library, and soon the vaults began to fill with Dhakaani scrolls and the records of the first gnomes, which were carved on sticks of wood. The Library became a point of gnomish pride, and representatives of all of the city-states sat on the council of doyens.

Then came the first great wars of the Current Age. Malleon the Reaver swept the southern coast, and Karrn the Conqueror began the work that Galifar would eventually complete. The gnomes found themselves faced with twin dilemmas. Could any of the city-states stand alone against humanity? And could they trust the other city-states not to betray them? Ultimately, the leaders found one answer to both problems: Expand the alliance they'd

created with the council of doyens, and formally bind the three cities as one. After a few social experiments, the city councilors settled on the Triumvirate, and the unified nation was born. The gnomes called the new realm Zilargo, "The Home of the Wise."

Working as one, the Zil gnomes held their own against human and goblin alike. The gnomes were equally adept at working with wood and words, and they had uncovered deep deposits of gems in the Seawall Mountains. The people of Trolanport and Korranberg gained fame as sailors and shipwrights, and gnome merchants, mediators, translators, and scribes spread across the Five Nations.

The Trust

The Zil alliance did not erase the feuds of the past. The Triumvirate could not eradicate the competitive nature of the gnomes -- and in truth, the cutthroat cunning of the gnomes was a point of national pride. But since these feuds began to threaten the interests of the new nation, it became clear that something had to be done. Once more the nation looked to the Library for inspiration, drawing on the example of the syndicate established to enforce honesty among students. Each Triumvir was authorized to select agents from her own city to create a corps of secret police -- an elite force who could be relied upon to place the interests of the nation above all else. Over time, all matters of law enforcement and national security were placed in the hands of the Trust. In many nations, gnomes serve as barristers and advocates, but in Zilargo there is no court of law: the Trust punishes the guilty, and its justice is swift and merciless. It is invisible and omniscient, staffed with spies, diviners, and assassins. Any Zil citizen could be an agent of the Trust. This calling comes above friendship and family. Even when you are alone, you might be watched by an invisible spy or scrying eyes. The Zil gnomes see this as a virtue; while they have little privacy, they also have the lowest crime rate of any nation in Khorvaire. The Trust is there when it is needed and invisible when it is not; even the members of the organization know only a handful of other members. In the eyes of the typical gnome, a loss of privacy is a small price to pay for security.

The Trust acts only if something threatens society. The Zil gnomes constantly engage in blackmail and intrigue. This is a way of life in Zilargo, and the Trust acts only if the intrigues threaten the security of the nation or cause laws to be broken. For example, if a blackmailer forces his victim to give him a lucrative shipping contract, no harm is done; the wealth still remains in the nation. On the other hand, if the blackmailer forces his victim to commit a murder, steal a rare book from the Library, or give secrets of elemental binding to House Cannith, the Trust intervenes quickly.

This raises the following issue: If the Trust is so powerful, how can adventurers get away with anything in Zilargo? First, the Trust does not interfere unless Zil citizens are threatened. If a party of adventurers is chasing a Brelish fugitive -- well, provided that the adventurers don't disrupt the lives of Zil citizens in their hunt, they are free to do as they will. Of course, if the fugitive finds refuge in the home of a doyen, the adventurers need to find a way to extract the target without harming the household. Second, as noted earlier, intrigue isn't necessarily a crime. And most importantly, the Trust is not as omniscient as it wants people to believe. Anyone could be an agent of the Trust -- but not everyone is. Careless criminals and adventurers who think that they are above the law may be cut down to size by the Trust. But if the party acts carefully and cautiously by planning out its steps and taking advantage of disguise and abjuration magic, they can escape even the eyes of the Trust. Adventurers still can accomplish their goals in Zilargo -- they just need to use their brains instead of relying on sword and *fireball* to solve all their problems.

Galifar to the Present Day

The Zil gnomes have never sought to build empires; instead, they have always insinuated themselves into the nations of others. In the Mror Holds, the gnomes do much of the actual work of the banking industry. Gnome

merchants and sailors have a strong foothold in the Lhazaar Principalities, and they live and work in coastal communities across Khorvaire. In Breland, gnome crafters and engineers labor closely with the centers of industry. In Aundair, Zil sages hold key posts in the Arcane Congress and the University of Wynarn. The message stations of House Sivis are the key to international communication, and the Korranberg Chronicle is the most trusted source of news on the continent. Gnomes are everywhere, and they are almost always overlooked. But few realize the tight bonds of family -- and this is what gives the gnomes their power.

Next Week: Playing a Zil gnome!

About the Author

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of **Eberron** to the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the **Eberron** Campaign Setting and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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